Beyond Paradise? *Retelling Pacific Stories in Disney's* Moana

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Beyond Paradise? Retelling Pacific Stories in Disney's Moana

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with Dionne Fonoti

> Motunui is paradise. Who would want to go anywhere else?
> —Chief Tui, *Moana*

> For years we've been swallowed by your culture. One time can you be swallowed by our culture?
> —Yves "Papa Mape" Tehiotaata, Oceanic Story Trust

An Ocean in Mind

The trope of paradise has figured prominently in filmic representations of the Pacific. Images of sparkling azure waters lapping against pristine white-sand beaches bordered by verdant tropical landscapes constitute a perennial staple of visual motifs through which the Islands have been imaged and imagined. Films from Hollywood's Golden Age—such as *Bird of Paradise* (1932), *South Pacific* (1958), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935, 1962, 1984), *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* (1966), and, more recently, *Blue Crush* (2002) and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008)—attest to the perduring presence of "paradise" in the narrative plotlines woven about the region by outsiders for outsiders. As a master of storytelling and fantasy weaving for just over eighty years, the megamedia corporation the Walt Disney Company has been active in advancing the illusion of a "Pacific paradise" for Western popular consumption through many of its films, most of which have been set in Hawai'i, including the animated short *Hawaiian Holiday* (1937), *Parent Trap: Hawaiian Honeymoon* (1989), and *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), to name but a few.

In this article, I examine Disney's recent production *Moana* (2016), an animated film set exclusively in the Pacific, which draws on the Indig-

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enous cultures and oral traditions of the region to tell the story of a young girl who sets out on an ocean odyssey to save her people from impending disaster. I interrogate the degree to which the trope of paradise is deployed in the film and, more significantly, how Pacific Islanders—specifically members of the Oceanic Story Trust—were involved in guiding the film's narrative beyond a fixation on paradise and toward a perspective that is infused in meaningful ways with Pacific histories and epistemologies.

While Disney has a history of possessing—or, as the epigraph above suggests, "swallowing"—Indigenous stories by transforming them into two-dimensional fantasies, I propose that, in the case of *Moana,* Pacific people enacted their own form of possession by staking a claim on how their collective story would be told by the media giant. Indeed, *Moana* offers a useful case study for thinking about strategic collaborative engagements between Native communities and global corporate enterprises like Disney in ways that can be productive and that acknowledge and affirm Indigenous agency while remaining attentive to the potential tensions and risks of such undertakings. In this article, Samoan filmmaker and visual anthropologist Dionne Fonoti offers her own firsthand account of working on the film as a member of the Oceanic Story Trust. Her "insider insights" are critical for revealing the complex and negotiable process of exchange that transpired between Pacific cultural consultants and Disney film executives during the making of *Moana*.

Given the long-standing opposition by Indigenous communities to the appropriation of their cultures and the debates over the question of "authenticity," it seemed inevitable that *Moana* would become a contested site. Even before it opened in theaters, a number of commentators—the majority of them prominent members of the Pacific academic community—began expressing their grievances about the film through the Facebook page "Mana Moana: We Are Moana, We Are Maui," online blogs, and public media outlets. The critiques they leveled included but were not limited to the alleged offensive stereotyping of Māui as an obese, arrogant buffoon and the misrepresentation of the Hawaiian goddess Pele as a villainous "Lava Monster" (ie, Te Kā). Other criticisms were aimed at Disney's commodification of Pacific identity, especially the Māui character Halloween costume—a brown, tattooed "skin suit" with faux grass skirt and wig—which sent a wave of collective outrage across many Pacific communities, academic and nonacademic, and sparked accusations that it was a blatant example of "brown facing." (Disney quickly responded by recalling the costume from store shelves and issuing an apology.)

While the critiques relating to the cultural content and merchandising of *Moana* were not necessarily unwarranted—the Māui skin suit was undoubtedly an egregious error—what was more troubling was the way members of the Oceanic Story Trust became the focal point of ad hominem attacks, which were suffused with acerbic epithets such as "Pacific Mouseketeers" "sellouts," and "Dis-Mo-Loving-PIs [Pacific Islanders]" ("Dis-Mo" being an abbreviated derivation of "Disney-Moana"). The "Mana Moana" Facebook page in particular, which purported to be a "place for critical thought about Disney and the Pacific," became a virtual hub for agitating and promoting anti-*Moana* sentiments. Alternative viewpoints were either not included on the site or "shouted" down if they were shared on discussion threads. As the debate intensified, it soon became clear that the "we" in "We Are Moana, We Are Maui" did not extend to all members of Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific, as we say in Māori), rendering the regional unity that we as Pacific people routinely invoke—especially those of us who work in Pacific studies circuits—patently superficial. As one colleague remarked privately in response to the discord *Moana* had generated among Pacific Islanders: "Looks like there's trouble in Paradise."

The strong emotional reactions and at times openly hostile commentaries are not surprising when we consider the high stakes involved in the diffusion of Pacific culture into global capitalist spheres. Historically, this is a process that has entailed the misappropriation of Indigenous traditions, rituals, and images for use as commodities in circuits of capital accumulation. The commodification of Pacific culture for mass consumption and economic profit by companies like Disney has understandably attracted fierce opposition by those who seek to protect Pacific cultural patrimony from what they believe to be a system of exploitation tied to the ongoing project of colonialism. But we must remain attentive to the fact that, while some Indigenous stakeholders choose to adopt separatist strategies, others form strategic alliances with powerful actors to ensure a degree of control over how culture is represented. As Fonoti writes later in this essay, her own motivation for collaborating with Disney was premised on a deep sense of responsibility she felt to make sure the Pacific stories and culture that were being shared in *Moana* were represented respectfully.

A central goal of this article is to create a space for considering the complex motives behind Pacific participation in the *Moana* project—something that was conspicuously absent in the condemnatory analyses that emerged around the film and which became the dominant discourse.

Moana deserves—indeed, demands—a more nuanced and open analysis in order to more fully understand its role in the complicated space of global corporate capitalism in the Pacific context and the messy, negotiable, seemingly contradictory ways that Pacific Islanders move within that space. The idea that *Moana* can simply be summed up as an instance of cultural theft, and Indigenous participation as an act of mindless complicity—as a number of critics have implied if not outright declared—not only reinforces a "fatal impact" view that consigns Islanders to being passive victims acted on by global forces but also assumes that there can only ever be one way of representing culture. Trinh T Minh-ha reminded us that cultural communities by nature comprise multiple identities and, thus, "there can hardly be such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders" (1991, 75). If the catchphrase "We are Moana" is to have any meaning at all, we need to recognize and acknowledge the multiple identities that make up the "we" and how out of that diversity come different ways of representing Pacific culture and, in a related way, for engaging with power. To assume otherwise runs the risk of falling into the quagmire of cultural essentialism, ideological rigidity, and intolerance, which, as Albert Wendt observed, "is a prescription for cultural stagnation, an invitation for a culture to choke in its own body odour, juices, and excreta" (1976, 53). Thus, what follows is simply one version of a very complicated story—a story that begins and ends with an ocean in mind.

Encountering Moana

"Moana" is a proto-Polynesian word that means "sea beyond the reef, ocean" (Ross, Pawley, and Osmond 2007, 94). It is a shared cognate in numerous Polynesian languages across the Pacific and provides a useful linguistic cue for recalling the journeys early peoples made in an effort to get "beyond the reef" of their original home shores and settle the islands of the world's largest ocean. Beginning around four to five thousand years ago, Austronesian-speaking migrants embarked on a series of epic ocean crossings that took them far from their homeland in the west—most likely Taiwan or thereabouts—into the farthest reaches of the Pacific to the east. This momentous feat of human dispersal was carried out over multiple generations using sailing vessels that, in the course of centuries of development and refinement, culminated in the technological paragon we know today as the double-hulled canoe. For these long-distance seafar-

ers, the ocean was not a restrictive barrier but rather a fluid highway that enabled them to voyage into Near and Remote Oceania, some arriving at the long-inhabited islands of Melanesia, before traveling on to arrive in the islands now called Polynesia, while other voyagers traveled north, eventually arriving in Micronesia (Kirch 2017). Of course, at that time the three "nesias" did not exist; these artificial divisions of space imposed by the West had not yet come to define the world the hardy Pacific wayfarers traversed. Rather, as Epeli Hau'ofa reminded us, "Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled" (1994, 153–154). This was the kind of ocean these intrepid mariners encountered and inhabited—one that was boundless and brimming with potential—as they expanded into the new frontier.

Moana—which opened to American audiences in November 2016—relays the story of a young Polynesian girl of the same name (voiced by Auli'i Cravalho), who possesses an innate love of the ocean and a desire to voyage past the breakers of her home island and explore the pelagic realms that lie beyond. This is despite the fact that her people, the people of the fictional island of Motunui, stopped voyaging a thousand years ago after the god Māui stole the heart of Te Fiti, the goddess endowed with the power to create life.[1] When Te Fiti's heart is taken, the world that she has created and sustained becomes corrupted. Living things begin to die and the ocean that the voyaging ancestors of Motunui once sailed across with audacious exuberance becomes a place of deadly storms, sea monsters, and pirates—a place to be feared. The Islanders now remain within the confines of the reef. But when the creeping corruption begins to threaten Motunui, Moana decides that the only way to save her people and her island is to voyage beyond the reef to find Māui, convince him to restore the heart of Te Fiti, and thus set things right. So begins this young heroine's journey across the ocean.

To turn briefly from the fictional tale of *Moana* to the post-contact history of the Pacific, Western travelers in the eighteenth century relayed stories of their own journeys through the region via written and visual narratives. After arriving in Tahiti in 1768, for instance, French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville wrote that the experience was like being "transported into the garden of Eden" (1772, 228). The people, he continued, enjoyed "the blessings which nature showers liberally down upon them" and embodied "hospitality, ease, innocent joy, and every appearance of happiness amongst them" (1772, 228–229). Bougainville's wistful sentiments were shared by his artistic contemporaries such as John Webber

and William Hodges who visually portrayed the islands and people they encountered in a similar vein through their paintings, sketches, and etchings (Smith 1985). These kinds of nostalgic depictions correspond with what David Spurr referred to as a rhetorical mode of idealization whereby land and people are temporally fixed in "a realm outside of time"—a realm of primitive, Arcadian simplicity (1993, 127). This same kind of idealization is deployed in discernible ways in *Moana*.

Early on in the film, audiences are introduced to Motunui through a visual tour of the island that ranges over towering cliffs, verdurous valleys, and a luxuriant landscape covered in dense and vividly colored tropical foliage that is made all the more vibrant through Disney's digital-animation genius. In the village, the inhabitants go about their daily lives in a pantomime of changing scenes that are stocked with quasi-ethnographic elements—cultural dances (a mix of Hawaiian and Samoan dance traditions), the harvesting of bountiful yields of taro and coconuts, weaving, and fishing. The people of Motunui comport themselves with "every appearance of happiness" as they sing their way through one of the signature songs in the film, "Where You Are." Finally, encompassing this earthly garden of delight is the tranquil presence of the reef and the ocean beyond.

This visual tableau of an idyllic environment inhabited by a carefree society living in a "state of nature" articulates with images that today continue to circulate in films, television shows, and tourism promotional materials—idealized images of a Pacific paradise that are designed to project an idea of the region, especially of Polynesia, for the purpose of translating it into commercial gain. Paradise, after all, sells; it is a profitable commodity in the "treasure-house of mimetic capitalism" that is exported globally (Deckard 2007, 292). *Moana* can certainly be read as a strategy on the part of Disney to tap into the moneymaking potential of the paradise trope. But it can also be understood from other perspectives as being rooted in a lived reality that has personal and collective meaning for Pacific Islanders. As Vaimoana Tapaleao, a *New Zealand Herald* writer of Samoan ancestry who lives in New Zealand, put it: "The Polynesia depicted in the film is an animated yet mirror image of our backyard. The glittering see-through ocean looks like the one the village kids splash in behind my mum's family fale [house] in Savaii. . . . The way the lava meets the sea, the way the blow holes spit out jets of water near the beach and even the lushness of the plants, frangipani trees and teuila, or red ginger, yeah, it is magical, but it is also our reality" (Tapaleao 2016).

Taking Tapaleao's perspective into account, it becomes clear that the paradise topos evoked in *Moana* cannot simply be summarized as artifice in the service of entertainment and economic enterprise—although I do not dismiss that this is part of the logic behind Disney's use of it—but rather it can be simultaneously read as a deeply felt homeland to which a sense of Islander identity and belonging is anchored. Paradise is not just some imaginary realm "out there" to be discovered or, indeed, consumed. Rather, for many it is a fully realized and experienced place that is loved—or, as Tapaleao's statement as a Samoan living in the diaspora reveals, lovingly remembered—and exists in such humble, everyday settings as a family backyard.[2]

In exploring how paradise is deployed in *Moana,* it is equally relevant to consider its antonym, what Sharae Deckard has termed "anti-paradise." If paradise characterizes nature as bountiful and humans as pure and innocent, anti-paradise offers the "image of the 'fallen' or 'depraved' Eden" (2007, 16), a condition that John Milton famously immortalized in his seventeenth-century epic poem *Paradise Lost*. However, in the case of *Moana,* it is the god Māui (as opposed to Adam and Eve) who precipitates "the fall" when he steals the heart of Te Fiti and transforms her from being a benevolent life-giver to a deadly monster of molten lava called Te Kā. So changed, she unleashes a darkness that begins to invade the world. On Motunui the fish disappear, the food crops become diseased, and an island that was once a scene of environmental abundance becomes a site of wholesale ecological collapse. There are a number of ways we can read into this anti-paradise trope in *Moana,* one of which is to treat it as a metaphor for settler colonialism in Polynesia and the wider Pacific. The Eden that enthralled Enlightenment explorers like Bougainville in the eighteenth century also attracted the interest of foreign actors, corporations, and nation-states eager to expand their imperial reach—indeed, to expand their power beyond their own shores. Paradise in this sense became a place to possess, exploit, and, ultimately, settle. Thus, the Pacific of the nineteenth century was largely characterized by the seizure of Indigenous lands and the "slow, insinuating invasion of people, ideas, and institutions" (Osorio 2002, 3). Western utopic visions dissolved into dystopic realities as the colonial "darkness" spread.

In a related way, the degradation of Motunui may also be seen as a metaphor for tourism, a "process of cultural invasion" that is inextricably linked to colonialism (Helu-Thaman 1993, 104). *Moana* critic Tina Grandinetti has insightfully made the connection between the film and

the invasiveness of tourism in the specific context of Hawai'i, stating: "When you view *Moana* in the context of Hawaii's dependence on mass tourism, it doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination to see 'the Darkness' that threatens Moana's island as an unintentional allegory for an exploitative industry that continues to devour land and resources for resort development" (Grandinetti 2017).

Global capitalism in the form of tourism and development has wrought traumatic change in the Pacific, particularly in relation to the destruction of the environment, including ruinous logging practices, open-pit mining, overfishing, the accumulation of plastics in the ocean, the ongoing environmental effects of nuclear testing, and—the most pressing concern of our age—human-induced climate change, from which the resulting rise in sea levels is already in the process of drowning many islands in the region (see, eg, Katovai, Edwards, and Laurance 2015; Golub 2014; O'Gorman 2016; Sun 2014; Barker 2013; Williams and McDuie-Ra 2018). The Pacific has become a scene of epic and sweeping ecocide. Some critics of *Moana* have argued that the film conceals this woeful truth under a cloak of cultural nostalgia and whimsical fantasy. It is my position, however, that rather than concealing the threats confronting the Pacific, *Moana* in fact illuminates them by using the trope of anti-paradise as a parable to show what happens when the "heart" of the environment (the environment in the film symbolized as Te Fiti) is "stolen" and why there is a critical need for its return if environmental health and balance is to be restored (as occurs in the film when Te Fiti's heart is returned).

Since the opening of *Moana,* Disney has expanded this message of environmental restoration and protection by funding an ocean conservation education program in Sāmoa in partnership with Conservation International and the Samoan Voyaging Society. On one level, we can interpret such philanthropic overtures as a positive sign that, despite its profit-making motivations, Disney is genuinely committed to pursuing a program of environmental responsibility and of giving back to Pacific communities, many of which participated in the development of the film. But corporate giving, despite its benevolent appearance, is often pitted with contradiction. Although Disney may have bankrolled a worthy cause like ocean conservation in Sāmoa, it has—in a deeply paradoxical way—actively participated in some of the same processes that threaten Pacific environments. It is highly likely that at some point in time the millions of pounds of plastic products that have been manufactured as part of the *Moana* merchandizing campaign—such as Moana and Māui dolls, *Moana*-themed

Lego sets, jewelry, and so forth—will likely end up littering the very ocean on which the film is based, adding to what has been termed a "plastic Paradise" (see Pyrek 2016). While it is beyond the purview of this article to elaborate more about the conflicting realities of corporate giving in the Disney–Pacific context, it opens up a potential line of enquiry to be pursued in future papers.

Paradise and anti-paradise are prevalent topoi in *Moana* but they do not define the overall substance of the film. Indeed, the true substance is to be found in the infusion of Indigenous stories—stories that are steeped in Pacific ancestral narrative traditions but which in the context of the movie are revised and told in new ways. The film also opens up new ways of thinking about "paradise" that go beyond the image of the "Pacific paradise" that is manufactured for economic profit, particularly in the context of tourism. For diasporic Islanders like Vaimoana Tapaleao, for instance (cited above), scenes in *Moana* of a "glittering see-through ocean" and tropical lushness served as poignant reminders of her home and family in Sāmoa. Kalissa Alexeyeff's work is instructive for thinking about the dualistic, seemingly contradictory ways paradise operates as both a leitmotif in the service of colonial and capitalist enterprise and "as an affective geography for local expression," identification, and sense of belonging (2016, 407). In the context of the film, paradise as commodity and paradise as symbol of Islander identity converge as imbricated realities.

Retelling Pacific Stories

As the final wave of voyagers—the people who would become the Polynesians—fanned out into the easternmost part of the Pacific region, they chronicled the events that shaped their lives and forged their histories in an extensive cultural reservoir of narratives. Epic stories were woven around themes of voyaging and settlement, gods and monsters, human accomplishments, and human failures. In the absence of written language, these stories were relayed through song, chant, dance, theater, and art, and were transmitted to successive generations, each one adding its own embellishments over the centuries. This is perhaps where the transcendent quality of stories is most plainly discerned: Stories are not simply hermetically sealed archives of the past; rather, they are dynamic cultural "truths" that change over time as a result of human intervention, as we see in the case of *Moana*.

The film constitutes a bricolage of ancestral narratives borrowed from

across the Pacific, specifically Polynesia. One story involves Māui (voiced by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson), the shape-shifting, trickster god who features prominently in ancestral stories and genealogies across the region. As a revered figure in the pantheon of gods he is credited with accomplishing a multitude of superhuman feats, including slowing down the sun, bestowing humans with the gift of fire, hauling up the islands with a magical fishhook, and harnessing the wind, to name but a few. In *Moana,* these exploits are signaled visually in the extensive tapestry of tattoos that cover the character Māui's body, each one recalling his deeds, and they are also relayed in lyrical form in the song "You're Welcome," part of which reads, "When the nights got cold, who stole you fire from down below? You're looking at him, yo!" In the film, Māui is also endowed with his namesake's ability to shift from human to animal form, thus bringing shape-shifting—a critical component of Polynesian cosmology—into sharp relief.

In traditional Māori folklore, Māui's final exploit—his attempt to gain immortality—ends with his death when he tries to steal the heart of his grandmother Hinenuitepō (the Great Woman of Death) by climbing up through her birth canal while she sleeps. His plan fails, however. When Hinenuitepō awakens and discovers what her progeny is trying to do, she crushes him with her obsidian-teeth vagina. In *Moana,* this part of the narrative is eliminated. Rather than falling victim to the destructive grip of his ancestress's genitalia, Māui succeeds in stealing Te Fiti's heart and thus cheats death. Narrative modifications of this sort are commonplace in Pacific storytelling traditions, but in the case of *Moana* it attracted stern criticism from some of the film's detractors. For example, Tēvita O Kaʻili lambasted the absence of Hina in the film—a goddess who in Tongan narrative traditions is a co-present figure in stories involving Māui—as a "form of colonial erasure" (2016). While I do not dispute the validity of Kaʻili's opinion, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that for generations Pacific Islanders have been altering their stories out of creative inspiration or for the purpose of political expediency. Thus, the literary variations in *Moana* need not necessarily be taken as evidence of inauthenticity or, indeed, of colonial erasure, but rather they should be seen for what they are: as part of a legacy of storytelling that is "flexible, creative . . . [and] to a large extent, negotiable" (Hauʻofa 1994, 157).

The genealogical connection between mortals and ancestral guardians is an important element of Pacific stories and in *Moana* it is patently invoked. For instance, when Moana's grandmother (voiced by Rachel

House) Gramma Tala dies, she transforms into a magnificent, giant manta ray. Her apotheosis from human form to zoomorphic deity conforms to the widely held belief that those who have passed away return to protect their descendants (see, for instance, ʻaumakua in Hawaiian cultural tradition). And so it is with Gramma Tala, who in her reincarnated state helps her granddaughter succeed in sailing through the treacherous breakers of Motunui's reef into the open ocean where she begins her search for Māui. Later on in the film, Gramma Tala appears to Moana in human spirit form to dispense advice when her granddaughter begins to lose faith in her ability to complete her quest. We can compare the presence of Gramma Tala in the film to similar characters in Disney's oeuvre. In *Pocahontas* (1995), for instance, another grandmother, Grandmother Willow, appears to Pocahontas as a tree to offer wise counsel.

It could be argued that these benevolent grandmother-cum-spirit guides do nothing more than reinforce the romantic myth of the mystic Native whereby Indigenous spirituality is reduced to mysterious "otherness" and Natives are cast as the bearers of pagan (and therefore primitive) beliefs—an extension of the broader "magical savage" trope. As Adrienne Keene argued in her critique of J K Rowling's online series of short stories, *The History of Magic in North America* (2016), in which Native Americans are portrayed as possessing magical powers, such representations advance the fallacious notion that "Native people are always 'mystical' and 'magical' and 'spiritual'" (Keene 2016). Nevertheless, we should not foreclose on other potential readings when it comes to understanding the significance of Indigenous spirituality in *Moana*. In the film, the presence of Gramma Tala both when she was alive and when she appears to Moana in spirit form reaffirms the important roles women—especially elder women—play in Pacific narrative traditions as guides and counselors. Further, it highlights the unceasing connection that exists between the living and the dead, a powerful reality that continues to hold true for Pacific people today.

In terms of its representation of Pacific cultural traditions, perhaps one of the most striking themes of the film is long-distance voyaging. One scene shows an armada of double-hulled canoes cutting a swath through the open ocean while the crew on board look triumphantly toward an expansive horizon. It is compelling imagery that is heightened by the dramatic musical platitudes of one of the film's signature songs "We Know the Way," performed by the highly acclaimed, pan-Pacific group Te Vaka. The chorus of the song reads:

Aue, aue
We set a course to find
A brand new island everywhere we roam
Aue, aue
We keep our island in our mind
And when it's time to find home
We know the way

It is difficult not to get caught up in the stirring momentum of this idealized depiction of the voyaging past. The sweeping sonic and visual-scape of the film compels us to forget that, in reality, Pacific sailors did not always know or find their way to new islands. A greater number of vessels were likely lost at sea than succeeded in making landfall. These are stories that will never be told. Despite being drawn into the emotionally charged, immersive environment that Disney is so skilled at creating for audiences, there are nevertheless moments in the film that offer a more grounded rendering of Pacific voyaging. For example, in one scene Māui teaches Moana how to navigate by interpreting the signs observed in nature. The relaying of these cultural details in the film—such as how to read the position of the planets and the stars, the ocean swells, the direction of the wind, the ocean currents, and so forth—pays tribute to long-distance canoe voyaging and traditional navigational knowledge that is still used today throughout the Pacific (Finney 2003; Genz 2018; Howe 2007).

Moana is a celebratory tribute to Oceanic voyaging, but it also confronts gender disparities in the Pacific, beginning with the assumption that voyaging and navigation are the purview of men. As Elise Huffer wrote, "women's roles in [Pacific] navigation have been downplayed, if not ignored" (2008, 265). In the film, although Māui teaches Moana how to sail and navigate, it is she who ultimately guides the vessel to its destination. It is Moana, not Māui, who is the wayfinder. Further, despite Māui's larger-than-life status in ancestral Pacific folklore as the quintessential hero who achieves testosterone-fueled feats, in the film the "script" is flipped and he is cast as the antihero whom Moana must lead on the quest to return Te Fiti's heart.

Moana's story intersects closely with that of the female character Paikea in the acclaimed film *Whale Rider* (2002) in the sense that each girl is confronted with the task of overcoming the restrictive patriarchal bonds of tradition in order to fulfill their destiny. In the case of Paikea, she defiantly asserts her right to take on the role of leader of her community despite her grandfather's vehement opposition for no other reason than

that she is a female. In the case of Moana, she must contend with her loving but overbearing father. A pivotal moment in the film comes when Moana challenges Chief Tui's paternal authority by disobeying his order to stay within the reef. Moana not only sets sail beyond the reef, but it is her mother and grandmother—two other strong female characters in the film—who support her in leaving the island.

Patriarchal hegemony in the Pacific—where leadership roles, speaking rights, and decision-making authority in many Island societies remain the domain of men—is an ever-present issue for Pacific women. Samoan novelist Lani Wendt Young recently shared her own experience of being censured by a male member of her own community for statements she made in her online blog. The critic had opined: "A Samoan woman shouldn't be saying those things. Ask your father what you should write and what you should say. He's a matai [holder of male chiefly title] and very knowledgeable in our fa'a Sāmoa [Samoan way]. He will tell you what you should write about" (Wendt Young 2017). Such assumptions and assertions of male authority are challenged and displaced in *Moana* by the presence of a female lead character who is independent, brave, and self-possessed, rather than passive and submissive. And it is clear that Moana's strong bearing resonates with young female audiences. On more than one occasion, I have witnessed young girls of different ages—from Pacific Island and non-Pacific Island backgrounds—quote a popular line in the film, which they deliver with the same self-confident spirit of the film's young heroine: "I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the sea, and restore the heart of Te Fiti. I am a voyager!" As a representational text that can be "read" by young female audiences, *Moana* offers an empowered vision of Pacific femininity that overturns not only the well-worn archetype of the princess-in-distress-waiting-for-Prince-Charming that Disney has itself been guilty of promoting in past productions (*Snow White, Beauty and the Beast,* etc), but, in a significant way, it subverts the much older trope of the supine "Dusky Maiden" (see Tamaira 2010). In this sense, the film communicates something that, as a mother of a young daughter myself, I deeply appreciate: girl-power, Pasifika style.

Pacific Voices on Screen and Behind the Scenes

In terms of past representations of the Pacific and its people, Disney's track record has been less than stellar. Take for example the eight-minute animated short *Hawaiian Holiday* (1938), the opening scene of which

begins with a cinematic pan of an island beachscape, replete with white sand, surf, and the iconic image of Diamond Head in the background—visual motifs of a quintessential "Hawaiian paradise." On the beach, Minnie Mouse wears a grass skirt and wiggles her hips to the strains of slack-key guitar and ukulele played by her beach companions Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, respectively. Later in the film we see a flustered Donald running around in a grass skirt that caught alight because he got too close to a fire pit.

Similar stereotypical characterizations of Hawaiian culture are used to generate comedic farce in *The Parent Trap: Hawaiian Honeymoon* (1989). In one scene, for example, the Caucasian father in the film descends a flight of stairs wearing faux hula attire and performs a mock Hawaiian chant that entails shouting out a string of nonsensical words, each of which is theatrically punctuated by the shaking of a pair of ʻulīʻulī (gourd rattles). As the scene unfolds, we learn that the man is on his way to the "ʻUlīʻulī Hula Festival," where he is to take part in a dance competition. In both films, non-Hawaiian—and in the case of *Hawaiian Holiday*, nonhuman—characters play at "being Native" through an assortment of hackneyed cultural motifs and performances that are saturated with debasing racist overtones.

In the intervening years, Disney has attempted to address this history of cultural misrepresentation by taking a more considered and sensitive approach to telling its stories, especially in relation to stories that are drawn from Indigenous communities. In this regard, *Moana* constitutes a watershed moment in a couple of important ways. To begin with, it is the first animated film in the Disney canon to feature a cast that is comprised almost entirely of actors of Polynesian descent (the one exception being the inclusion of American actor Alan Tudyk, who lent his voice to the character Heihei, a dim-witted but adorably cute chicken). The Polynesian lineup of the movie includes Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson (Māui; Samoan), Temuera Morrison (Tui; Māori), Jemaine Clement (Tamatoa; Māori), Rachel House (Grandma Tala; Māori), Nicole Sherzinger (Sina; Hawaiian), Oscar Kightley (Fisherman; Samoan), Troy Polamalu (Villager; Samoan), and exciting young newcomer Auliʻi Cravalho (Moana; Hawaiian). As well as the nearly all-Polynesian cast, Māori actor/director Taika Waititi wrote early versions of the *Moana* script, and the chart-topping soundtrack, with its unmistakable Pasifika beats, was cowritten (along with Broadway's *Hamilton* impresario Lin-Manuel Miranda and Mark Mancina) by Tokelauan/Tuvaluan musician Opetaia Foaʻi of the acclaimed pan-Pacific group Te Vaka.

Also featured prominently on the film's soundtrack was the choral group Pasifika Voices, who are based at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, and led by celebrated choir director Igelese Ete. Indeed, the story of how Pasifika Voices came to be involved in the *Moana* project warrants special mention here since it reveals in part how Pacific participants actively pushed to work on the film. When he heard that Disney was planning to make *Moana,* Ete flew at his own expense to Los Angeles and left a message with Walt Disney Studios, part of which stated that they could not "produce a movie about the Pacific and not include voices of the Pacific" (quoted in TheCoconetTV 2017).

Ete's insistence for the inclusion of Pacific voices in the *Moana* project and the lengths to which he went emphasize more broadly how Pacific Islanders actively choose to engage with systems and sites of power to secure a place in the decision-making process and thereby control to a certain degree how their culture will be represented. Such strategic interventions are, of course, a precarious undertaking in the labyrinthine space of global capitalism where the dangers of co-option are always present. But as historian David Chappell wrote of early contact encounters between Pacific Islanders and outsiders, Pacific peoples "did not simply wait for the outside world to overwhelm them. The border of a seafaring people does not begin on the beach but *beyond it*" (1997, xvi; emphasis added). Rather than sitting on the beach waiting for foreign ships to land on their shores, early Pacific people paddled out past the reef to meet them. While oftentimes those encounters erupted into misunderstanding and violence, over time they also opened up opportunities for mutual interaction, dialogue, and negotiation. That legacy continues to be seen in the complicated, messy ways contemporary Islanders engage with the outside world, such as with megacorporations like Disney. In the section that follows, Dionne Fonoti offers an important insider's perspective to working as a member of the Oceanic Story Trust and helps shed light on the complex and negotiable process of exchange that transpired between Pacific consultants and Disney executives during the making of *Moana.*

Inside the Oceanic Story Trust: Dionne Fonoti

Research and development for *Moana* began in 2011 when the lead creative team—then producer Karen Tenkhoff, directors Ron Clements and John Musker, and senior animator James Finch—made their first trip to the Pacific. Over the course of three weeks the team visited Fiji, Sāmoa, and French Polynesia, the express purpose of which was to get a sense

of the different environments in those places and to determine how they would translate into animation. During the trip, the team also had the opportunity to meet with Pacific communities and, through them, get a sense of the cultural landscape of the places they were visiting. The first trip was heralded as a resounding success—Clements and Musker liked what they saw and went back to the United States with copious notes and the skeleton of a story that orbited around a rascal demigod, tatau traditions, and the legacy of ancestral Polynesian voyaging. *Moana* (at that time just a working title) was on the way to setting sail.

A year later, in 2012, the Oceanic Story Trust was established. In Disney parlance, a Disney Story Trust is a group of experts who are brought on board a film project to provide critical feedback and to help guide the project in the right direction. Up until 2012, the Story Trust was strictly limited to Disney insiders. So, in many ways, the formation of the Oceanic Story Trust—which was made up not only of Disney outsiders but also a large cadre of Pacific Islanders—constituted a significant shift in the company's protocol.

The Oceanic Story Trust comprised an eclectic group of artists, cultural practitioners, academics, and community leaders, all of whom possessed expertise in various parts of Pacific Islander culture, history, and language. The members included Samoans Tautala Asaua (archaeologist), Dionne Fonoti (anthropologist/filmmaker), Layne Hannemann (choreographer), Tiana Nonosina Liufau (ethnomusicologist/choreographer), and Su'a Sulu'ape Peter (master tattooist); Tahitians Yves "Papa Mape" Tehiotaata (master fisherman) and Hinano and Frank Murphy (natural historians/cultural practitioners); Fijians Jiujiu "Angel" Bera (navigator/chief) and the Korovo Community; Rotuman Dr Vilsoni Hereniko (academic/filmmaker); and Dr Paul Geraghty (linguist). Disney's Oceanic Story Trust point person was Native Hawaiian Kalikolehua Hurley, who served as the Community Relations Manager.

I was asked to join the Oceanic Story Trust in 2012, after meeting filmmakers Ron Clements and John Musker on their first trip to Sāmoa. Karen Tenkhoff, the producer at the time, emailed and then called me personally to explain the purpose of the Oceanic Story Trust and what my particular role would be, which was to help the directors develop the parts of the story that were directly linked to Pacific Islander history and culture. As I understood it, the Oceanic Story Trust was created to help provide a present-day context for a fictional story based loosely on Oceanic traditions and culture around three thousand years ago. They wanted any references

to Pacific culture to be grounded in research and, as much as possible, to depict Pacific peoples respectfully. I do not doubt that they also wanted to avoid an Indigenous "beat down" similar to the ones that followed the release of *Pocahontas* (1995), when Disney was slammed by members of the Powhatan tribe for making a film that, as Chief Roy Crazy Horse of the Powhatan Renape Nation stated, "perpetuates a dishonest and self-serving myth at the expense of the Powhatan Nation" (Chief Roy Crazy Horse 2017). Three years later, *Mulan* (1998) became a box-office flop in China amid complaints that the lead protagonist of the same name looked more "Korean or Western" than Chinese (Langfitt 1999). And, to return to the Pacific, the animated film *Lilo and Stitch* (2002) caught fire from many Native Hawaiians, one of whom described it as a "blatant disregard for our people and our traditions" (ho'omanawanui 2008, 9). Ultimately, I believe that Disney wanted *Moana* to be the result of meaningful collaboration with people from Oceania, a significant departure from the way the studio—or any Hollywood studio for that matter—has developed their films.

I thought long and hard about my decision to participate. I have never wanted to work in animation, nor have I ever wanted to work for Disney. I was trained in ethnographic film production and live action is my preferred form, and while I was excited about the prospect of a feature length film about the Pacific, I was dubious about how Disney would treat the subject matter.

My personal opinion of Disney, as a studio and as a storyteller, is an extension of my attitude toward all mainstream media makers—I have zero interest in them and what they create, largely because I believe everything they make is targeted specifically toward a Western audience. Ultimately, mainstream productions are designed for entertainment. They are deliberately superficial and escapist and their success is measured by box-office sales. In contrast, Pacific films deal with the complexity of the Pacific Island context and are more often than not politically charged. As Rotuman filmmaker Vilsoni Hereniko has argued, films made by Pacific Islanders are primarily geared toward creating "a more accurate picture of the Pacific" (1999). Aside from having had the privilege of being trained in Western academic institutions and raised in the United States, as a filmmaker and storyteller I try to, as Hereniko stated, create a more accurate picture of the Pacific for Pacific audiences. This is the trail that filmmakers like Merata Mita, Puhipau and Joan Lander, and Barry Barclay have blazed.

Given Disney's penchant for tiki kitsch and a history of cultural misrepresentation, I was concerned, to say the least, about the possible outcome of *Moana*. But in the end, when I finally agreed to work on the film, it was with the full knowledge that I was going to be helping Disney make their movie, but, for the first time in history, to my knowledge, Pacific people would be invited to be a part of it, and not just on the periphery or typecast, superficial characters, but as researchers, stewards, and repositories of knowledge. I did not expect everyone to like this film, but I was more scared of what Disney would do without our help. I worried about the damage that a truly Disneyfied version of Oceania would do, and if I could help avoid that, then it was my responsibility to try. I also felt the responsibility to include as many Pacific voices as possible in the process, even the skeptical ones. I had the chance to make a positive change, despite my misgivings, so I took it.

The consultancy process, by all accounts, was fairly straightforward. Kalikolehua Hurley corresponded with different Oceanic Story Trust members as directed by the directors and writers, as well as other heads of departments, depending on the particular expertise they required. Since most of the Trust members lived in the Pacific (except Hannemann and Liufau, who are based in Los Angeles), correspondence was conducted primarily over email or voice/video chat, and if a Trust member was in Los Angeles, a personal visit to the studio could be organized. Whenever possible the most up-to-date version of the film was screened for both Disney and Trust members to provide further opportunities for notes and feedback. All Trust members signed contracts and nondisclosure agreements and were compensated by the studio for their work. Being on the Oceanic Story Trust entailed an open and transparent line of communication with the producer, directors, and various crew members, and access to the story as it developed over the five-year period. Early on, the meetings were lengthy pitches conducted by Clements and Musker themselves, and then in later years, up until release, the consultations were focused on singular story details. The Trust had the opportunity to comment on any changes in the story line, and I think it is safe to say that they capitalized on these moments and asserted themselves as much as possible.

Because everyone was so geographically spread out, we didn't really have the opportunity to confer with each other on a sustained basis. But I know we all watched versions of the movie as it developed and I know all the things they asked me about, they ran by others. For instance, because Peter and I were here together, sometimes we would Skype with

one another and discuss, in particular, our reactions to references that related to Sāmoa. He and I would work toward a consensus and share our views with the team in Los Angeles. So although we didn't get to work all together at the same time with everyone on the Trust, every effort was made by Disney to make sure that cultural questions were answered by as many people as possible. I'd get asked about things I knew nothing about, like the kakamora—the pirate coconuts in the film—but I'd never heard of them (I came to learn later that the kakamora are part of Solomon Islands storytelling traditions and refer to small human-like creatures that are viewed by Solomon Islanders as tricksters). In those situations I'd refer them to someone who knew more—that's how a lot of people got pulled into the Trust actually, through personal connections. I recommended Taika Waititi, Peter, Richard Moyle who supervised music, and Tēvita O Ka'ili, a Pacific academic.

One particular detail that was purely Trust-driven is Māui's voluminous hair, a significant redesign that is attributed specifically to the Tahitian members of the Trust. Disney illustrators originally designed Māui to be bald; admittedly, he looked a bit more pirate than demigod. Since I'd never really considered what Māui's hair would have looked like originally, when I was shown very early drafts of his character, it didn't bother me that he was depicted without hair. However, when the Tahitian contingent visited the studio and were shown the latest version of the story, they were unsettled by images of a hairless Māui and quickly demanded that he be redesigned with hair, and lots of it. According to spokesperson Hinano Murphy, in French Polynesian lore, Māui is completely coiffed; he had to be, because his mana (power and prestige) was connected to his hair. The filmmakers called in the team of illustrators and set them to redrawing Māui right then and there, with the Tahitians encouraging them to "add more, more!" hair (Voice of the Islands 2017).

Another important change initiated by members of the Trust was the depiction of the Samoan ceremonial headdress or tuiga. Moana is not just the chief's daughter, she is the heir to his title, so part of the story centers around her being groomed to one day replace Tui as head of the village/family. In order to emphasize this, writers came up with a montage of Tui and Moana walking around the village visiting with various villagers engaged in different activities, and the scene called for Moana to be wearing a tuiga. In Samoan culture the tuiga is purely ceremonial and is never worn for anything other than formal rituals or performance, so when I saw the scenes I immediately told them that Moana should not wear the

tuiga. To my surprise, the filmmakers were resistant to my recommendation and in further discussions with them it became clear to me that they wanted to use the tuiga in ways that were completely removed from how Samoans use it—they understood that the tuiga is a symbol of status and rank, but were mistakenly equating it to the types of crowns worn by European royalty.

We spent several frustrating months going back and forth over the proper use of the tuiga until I finally enlisted another Samoan member of the Oceanic Story Trust, Su'a Sulu'ape Peter, to join the discussion. Su'a suggested the compromise that rather than wearing the tuiga, Moana would instead wear what Samoans call a pale fuiono, or shell encrusted headband or a simple flower pale, a fresh flower headband. In the final version of the film, Moana only wears the tuiga once, during a ceremony where her parents present her to the village, which is appropriate, while in the subsequent montage she is wearing a pale.

A final example of the important contributions Oceanic Story Trust members made to the film was through Samoan master tattooist Su'a Sulu'ape Peter. Su'a provided consultation specifically on Chief Tui's and Māui's tattoos. Tui, being the leader and chief, was depicted with a traditional Samoan pe'a and arm and chest tattoo, while Māui was covered with tattoos that represented his many legendary feats. All of the tattoos were designed and drawn by Disney animators, and Su'a was commissioned to ensure that the placement and composition were correct. According to Su'a, on his first visit to the studio he discovered a critical mistake in the design of one of Māui's tattoos: "Samoan tattooing represents nature and we have designs for mountains, trees, fish, water, birds . . . all our surroundings, everything flows from the water to the land. So when I went into the studio, I noticed that some of their artwork didn't make sense. Remember the story of Māui slowing down the sun? Well, the water design was on top, so I changed it to a mountain since it was on top and moved the water design below the mountain. It's a simple thing, but you have to be careful and make sure everything flows correctly" (pers comm, January 2017). The animated tattoos in *Moana* are a significant part of the film, and Su'a's expertise ensured that minute, yet critical details, such as the placement of tattoo motifs, would contribute to, and not detract from, the overall story. The collaboration between the Trust members and the filmmakers was a complicated, constantly transforming process of negotiation that was characterized by tensions and compromise on both sides.

Despite some of the tensions during the collaborative process with

Disney, what made the experience of working on the *Moana* project so fraught was the way members of the Trust began to be attacked by critics from other Pacific Islands—many of them members of the academic community—for our involvement in the film. The attacks, many of which were launched on the "Mana Moana" Facebook page, were not entirely surprising. Nevertheless, I was caught off guard by how vitriolic they were, especially as the "debate" really heated up about six months before the film had even come out. At that point, the only people who had seen the film were Disney crew and members of the Trust. I personally make a point not to critique things that I have not seen in their entirety, so I was surprised by the intensity of the critique in the lead-up to the release because those arguments were all based on the publicity material and two- and four-minute trailers Disney was drip feeding the public through various marketing campaigns.

I was also very surprised by how intensely personal the critiques were and how quickly the label "sell-out" entered the discussion, which was, ultimately, extremely disappointing to me. Many of the Pacific Islander academics that I had admired and looked up to over my own career, many of whom I have known personally for decades, were calling me a sell-out on social media and it was, quite frankly, shocking. I naively tried to engage in online discussions on two separate occasions, once on my own Facebook page, and once on the "Mana Moana" page, and both times I was immediately attacked and everything I said was twisted and taken out of context, so after that I disengaged from the discussions. I am not a regular user of social media and, as a vehicle for critical dialogue and analysis, Facebook is flawed, so it made sense for me to just leave it alone. I was hoping one of the academic critics would want to discuss the issues in a more in-depth and honest manner, away from social media and in the true manner of talanoa, but that didn't happen.

The whole "debate" (one-sided as it was, I don't know if it is fair to call it a debate) reminded me of an oft-quoted Samoan proverb, "Fesili Mulimai ia Muamai," which translates literally to "The last to arrive should ask the first to arrive." When my grandfather would say it to me, it was to remind me of the importance of gathering knowledge and information from those wiser and more experienced than you before taking a position or taking action. The saying is connected to the ancient story of a couple, Muamai and Mulimai, who had traveled to Savai'i with a bird that was reputed to be prized and owned by the Tuifiti. They were advised to keep their bird tethered for its own safety but one day Muli-

mai, feeling sorry for the bird, released it from its bindings and let it take flight, without conferring with Muamai. The bird was quickly set upon and killed by other birds and the resulting proverb has always been used to warn Samoans to make informed decisions before they act. This proverb, like all proverbs, has wide application, but I reference it now because most of the critique leveled against myself and other members of the Trust was done, largely and repeatedly, in ignorance. The people who knew the most about the *Moana* project—Trust members—were ignored, ridiculed, and attacked, and as a result there are now divisions in our Pacific community. Sacrifices, like the Tuifiti's prized bird, were made without an in-depth and open dialogue, and any opportunities to formulate, as a global Pacific community, solutions to the issues of Pacific representation and cultural appropriation were obstructed. I am reminded, every time I think about my *Moana* experience, of my own gruff grandfather, who was rarely openly affectionate but peppered every conversation we had with life lessons, because it is these reminders, more than anything, that keep me grounded—and hopeful.

Ultimately, the final product stands as the prototype for a new era in respectful and collaborative storytelling. Films that are ahistorical, privilege a Western perspective, or stifle marginalized voices are constantly being produced; and these are the films that Pacific people watch. *Moana* was a chance to interrupt the constant barrage of mainstream movie-fodder and the opportunity to participate was one that I, personally, could not ignore. Merata Mita, who was my mentor, taught me to see film as a tool and, when necessary, a weapon. Her view was that when "used responsibly, film can be a humanizing force in an increasingly material world, and can sometimes act as a catalyst of change" (Mita 1996, 53–54). *Moana* may not be perfect—what film is?—but it cannot be denied that it was made with a deep sense of responsibility, thought, and care. And I hope that, above all, Pacific filmmakers who see the film will be inspired to do better because they can and they must. At the very least, *Moana* serves as a "catalyst of change" that Pacific people can use to push ourselves forward in our own future filmmaking endeavors where we are at the helm.

Conclusion: Voyaging beyond the Reef

The 2016 opening of *Moana* saw the film rank number one in the US box office and ticket sales soar to just over US$81 million in its first five

days. Along with the financial windfall, *Moana* was accompanied by rave reviews, some of which were written by Pacific Islander journalists like Tapaleao, whose reaction to the film was visceral: "You know the film is something special when the opening scene brings a tear to the eye" (2016). In fact, when I saw the film with my young daughter a couple of weeks after the opening, I was similarly moved. And so was the audience. When the film ended and the credits rolled, they erupted into spontaneous applause. My own emotional response to *Moana* was not simply triggered by the visual marvel of the film's animation or the rhythmic beat of Te Vaka's distinctive Island sounds. Rather, it was because I felt a deep sense of recognition of what I was seeing on the screen. Tapaleao encapsulated it succinctly: "The people on screen actually look like us" (2016). And they do. From the conspicuously tattooed bodies (a first for Disney) and softly contoured Polynesian noses to—and this is where I felt particularly validated as a woman of Polynesian ancestry—Moana's strapping calves and wide feet! Many of the stories, too, grounded as they are in ancestral narratives, resonated with what I had grown up with. It was not a sense of banal nostalgia I felt as I watched the film but genuine cultural pride.

During an era when minority peoples—especially Pacific Islanders—continue to struggle to find representation in mainstream film and media, *Moana* in many ways deserves to be celebrated as a success in terms of it bringing the Pacific from the margins into the frame; in this case, the animated frame. Further, while *Moana* is undeniably a product of Disney, the fact that it has at its core meaningful and genuine Pacific content and Pacific participation in how it was developed also makes it distinctly Pacific. Samoan artist Yuki Kihara cleverly offered the term "Pasifikation" (in contrast to Disneyfication) to describe the way Pacific people co-opt what is foreign and make it their own. Indeed, the notion of Islanders making *Moana* their own has found expression in a way that has for decades been fundamental to building cultural resilience and self-empowerment in the Pacific—language revitalization. As of this writing, *Moana* has been translated into Māori and is currently in the process of being translated into Hawaiian. Maenette Benham, chancellor of the University of Hawai'i–West O'ahu, who is herself of Native Hawaiian ancestry, stated: "The movie can be used as a language learning tool, it builds positive motivation and pride for all children and youth to know their cultural moolelo [histories/stories]" (KHON2 News 2017). When we consider this and the many other positive gains that have resulted from Islanders daring to engage with power, perhaps in a sense Papa Mape's appeal in the

epigraph above has come to pass, at least to some degree: Disney has been swallowed by the Pacific.

But while some Pacific Islanders lauded *Moana* as a success in terms of how Pacific people, stories, and culture were represented—even Tongan poet Karlo Mila, who initially had misgivings about the film, stated after seeing it, "I felt OK about how Disney validated [our culture]" (quoted in Tupou 2017)—many others, as I acknowledge at the beginning of this article and which Fonoti expands on, lambasted it as yet another instance of cultural poaching by Disney. To this end an unanticipated outcome of *Moana* was the way it revealed underlying ideological fault lines among Islanders regarding how Pacific culture should be represented and by who, and the degree to which such differences can potentially lead to fragmentation.

During the course of writing this essay, an image has consistently come to mind that I think helps characterize the relationship between Pacific Islander participants and Disney during the making of *Moana*. The image is a pencil and watercolor illustration that was drawn in 1769 by Tupaia, the Raiatean priest who served as cultural mediator, translator, and navigator for Captain James Cook during his voyages around the Pacific. Titled *A Maori Bartering a Crayfish,* the illustration depicts a Māori man who is in the process of bartering a large crayfish for a piece of tapa that is being proffered in return by English botanist Joseph Banks.

Aside from the aesthetic value of the work, what is to me most compelling is the way Tupaia's drawing captures the moment of transaction between the two men. They face each other with arms outstretched, each preparing to hand over his item of exchange to the other, each preparing to receive. The space between them connotes a kind of contact zone—as theorized by Mary Louise Pratt—whereby two cultures, Māori and English, converge in mutual accord as co-present, interactive partners (1992, 7). This is not to ignore the preexisting structural power between the men, but it does acknowledge the power that "the margins" in the zone of contact have to interrupt and reshape dominant frames of knowledge circulation and representation.

As I have written elsewhere in relation to the involvement of Native Hawaiians in the development of Disney's Aulani Resort in Hawai'i (Tamaira 2015, 2016), I believe it is productive to think about Indigenous engagements with global corporate enterprises like Disney in precisely this way—as contact zones where both groups meet in an interface of mutuality and dialogue. The effects of such contact are, of course, unpredict-

able. As well as mutuality and dialogue, there is always the potential for misunderstanding, disagreement, and imbalance of power. Nevertheless, while such tensions and asymmetries are inherent in the contact zone, it would be a mistake to treat them as rationale for retreating into isolationism and cynicism. The point I am trying to make here is that regardless of what the agendas were for either partner—Oceanic Story Trust or Disney—in a crucial way, they each showed a willingness to expand beyond their own proclivities and expectations to meet in the middle, even if that middle—the zone of contact—was already always going to be unstable. And perhaps it is not so much the end product of that partnership—the film—that is important but rather it is the process by which the conditions for new possibilities, new ways of working together were cultivated during the collaboration. As Fonoti writes, it presaged "a new era in respectful and collaborative storytelling." I argue that this reaching out toward each other (if we return to Tupaia's illustration) should be acknowledged with optimism rather than repudiated as an instance of Islanders being co-opted—indeed, swallowed—by Disney, as a number of critics have insisted. Islanders have always engaged with the outside world, for better or worse. Why would this current age be any different? And it is precisely *because* of our willingness to engage with and become entangled in relations of power with outsiders that we have ultimately been able to serve as "vector[s] of intervention" (Fisher 2006, 45). We cannot hope to intervene in processes of power if we stay on the beach. We must be willing to paddle out. Fonoti's personal account of working as a member of the Oceanic Story Trust reveals her efforts and those of others in the group to intervene in the decision-making process with Disney, whether it was in relation to giving Māui hair, restricting the use of the Samoan tuiga, or making sure the placement of tattoo designs was correct.

Beyond the Trust members, participants like Opetaia Foa'i of Te Vaka carried out their own form of intervention. Foa'i—who has spent over two decades "on a mission" to spread pride of Pacific voyaging culture through his music—strategically used *Moana* as a vehicle to get the message of voyaging into "more homes, more people without having to tour" (TVNZ 2016). And celebrated *Hōkūle'a* navigator Nainoa Thompson, who was also a consultant on the film (although not included as part of the Oceanic Story Trust), rationalized his participation in the project in the following way: "What I wanted to do with Disney was to create educational opportunities about the truth and the real stories told by Pacific people" (quoted in Genegabus 2016).

While *Moana* is suffused with elements of paradise in its depiction of Polynesia, as I hope I have made clear, paradise does not define the full substance of the film. The core substance is found in the stories—stories that have for millennia been told within and between islands and now, in the contemporary context of *Moana,* shared with Pacific and non-Pacific audiences across the globe. Further, *Moana* offered a strategic site for Indigenous participants to exercise stewardship over their respective cultures by controlling, as much as they could, how their stories would be told within the broader Disney narrative. Fonoti's account of her own involvement in the film sheds valuable insight in this regard.

In "Our Sea of Islands," Hau'ofa wrote, "The world of Oceania is not small; it is huge and growing bigger everyday" (1994, 151). I propose that *Moana* serves as a contemporary wa'a (sailing vessel) that enlarges our presence in the world by carrying our stories, cultures, values, traditions, and even our languages beyond the reefs of our home shores into the global domain.[3] Of course, such voyages are not without considerable risk. What we can only ever hope for when setting out for new horizons are favorable winds, calm seas, and the skills to navigate the way ahead.

* * *

THE AUTHORS EXTEND WARM GRATITUDE *to the two anonymous peer reviewers who provided valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this article.*

Notes

1 This part of the film's narrative is based on the premise that once Pacific migrants reached Sāmoa and Tonga they halted further expansion for approximately two thousand years—what has come to be referred to as the Long Pause—after which time they began dispersing into the rest of Polynesia.

2 As Kalissa Alexeyeff has written in relation to what she describes as the "re-purposing" of the paradise trope by diasporic Cook Islanders, stereotypical images of white-sand beaches and swaying coconut trees on posters in peoples' homes serve as important aide-mémoires of the Islands (see Alexeyeff 2016).

3 As an anecdotal aside, during a special Mother's Day performance in my daughter's kindergarten class, the children sang the *Moana* song "We Know the Way" entirely in the Tokelauan language.

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Abstract

The trope of paradise has figured prominently in filmic representations of the Pacific—Polynesia in particular. Films from Hollywood's Golden Age up to the contemporary period testify to the perduring presence of "paradise" in the narrative plotlines woven about the region by outsiders for outsiders. In this article, the authors examine Disney's latest blockbuster production, *Moana* (2016), an animated movie that is set exclusively in the Pacific and draws on Polynesian oral traditions to tell the story of a young girl on a mission to save her people from the threat of disaster. We interrogate the degree to which the trope of "paradise" is deployed in the film and, more significantly, how Pacific Islanders—specifically members of the Oceanic Story Trust—were instrumental in shifting the film's narrative beyond a fixation on "paradise" toward a perspective that is infused in meaningful ways with Pacific histories and epistemologies. Although *Moana* has received a fair amount of academic attention—much of it before the film was even released, especially by Pacific scholars who lambasted it as yet another example of cultural theft and exploitation—much of the emerging discourse has failed to consider in any substantive way how Islanders themselves were involved in the development process. In order to address this lapse in understanding, we provide firsthand insight into the working relationship between Pacific and Disney participants and reveal the complex and negotiable process of exchange that transpired in the making of *Moana*.

KEYWORDS: paradise, *Moana,* Oceanic Story Trust, Disney, Pacific stories, Māui